

The ELEVATOR SPEECH: Its Important Role in Science

The "elevator speech" is intended for that ephemeral, 2-minute unanticipated window of opportunity for capturing someone's attention and conveying to them the essence and importance of what you do.

The elevator speech has long been a mainstay of the business world. With the continued blending of many aspects of business and science (driven in part by heightened competition for dwindling resources), the elevator speech should hold an important place in science. Its importance to science, however, usually goes unnoticed. You can read one view of the role for the elevator speech in science here: "'Emerging' Pollutants, and Communicating the Science of Environmental Chemistry and Mass Spectrometry – Pharmaceuticals in the Environment," *J Am Soc Mass* **2001** 12(10):1067-1076 (in the web version, the pertinent section can be found by searching for "elevator" or going to page 11 at: http://www.epa.gov/nerlesd1/chemistry/pharma/images/book_jasma.pdf).

Certain business schools (e.g., Wake Forest University's Babcock Graduate School of Management) have formal elevator speech competitions, where students are given 2 minutes (and NO MORE) to pitch their business idea to a hypothetical venture capitalist; the Wake Forest "Elevator" web site can be accessed (after an introductory animated screen) at: <http://www.mba.wfu.edu/elevator/>. The Wake Forest competition has been covered in a range of news stories: <http://www.mba.wfu.edu/elevator/press.html>. Here's a segment that was broadcast by NPR's *MarketPlace*: "Elevator Competition" (by Leda Hartman, 22 April 2003) can be accessed from:

http://www.marketplace.org/shows/2003/04/21_mpp.html

or directly accessed from here:

http://www.marketplace.org/play/audio.php?media=/2003/04/21_mpp&start=00:00:22:48.0&end=00:00:26:29.0

If you are interested in the importance of science communication (and how it can be improved), an array of pertinent resources can be found here:

<http://www.epa.gov/nerlesd1/chemistry/pharma/comm.htm>

Just as with the business community, where expertise at "pitching" an idea is critical to success, any research organization can also benefit from hosting its own "elevator competitions". The objective is for each scientist to convincingly convey in LESS THAN 2 minutes the importance of their work to a panel of judges (which can simply be the audience at large, preferably a mixture of scientists and laity); visuals are disallowed since the elevator speech is intended for moments of opportunity that usually cannot be anticipated. Presenters should imagine themselves on the same elevator as their senior-level managers (those in charge of funding). Each presenter should imagine having a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a convincing argument for why they need substantial new resources to pursue their newly patented idea (such as "Saving the Environment on a Shoestring").

Elevator competitions can hone the skills of scientists in framing their highly technical work in words that have meaning to all — a benefit not just for conveying the significance or importance of individual research projects to the public, but also to management and for garnering new resources. The spectrum of scientists' abilities to communicate the value of their work is usually found to be vast at any organization. Improving these abilities usually proves to be an enormous benefit to all.

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